

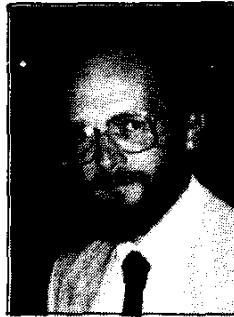
NEGLIGENT BORROWERS: Readers As Inadvertent Censors

By Gerald Greenberg

Writing in a fit of pique, Arthur E. Bostwick, Chief of Circulation at the New York Public Library in 1902, proclaimed borrowers who kept library books beyond their due date to be guilty of "mal prohibita" (to borrow an old ecclesiastical classification) — a violation of library regulations which should be punished by suspension of library privileges.¹ In a similar vein, the Oshkosh (Wisconsin) Public Library celebrated its thirteenth anniversary in 1926 by chastising the public with a visual display clearly showing just how much their overdue books cost the library in notices mailed, records kept, letters and bills delivered, and shelves searched." Even a cursory glance at library literature reveals that circulation rule "scofflaws" have been incurring the wrath of library workers for as long as books have been loaned.

When medieval monastic libraries first began permitting books to be borrowed, circulation rules were most stringent. Books were precious. Even Louis XI, in order to borrow a volume from Paris' Faculty of Medicine in 1471, had to sign a bond and get a wealthy nobleman to pledge his fortune as well to insure return of the book.³ As society's masses won political freedom, books, once chained and caged, became accessible to an increasingly educated leadership. In recent decades, even large research libraries have opened their voluminous bookstacks to borrowers who are permitted to borrow all but the rare or brittle from the huge circulating collection. Greatly increased circulation rates meant that greater numbers of books would be missing from the libraries' shelves for greater periods of time. What significance do we place on this result?

Emptier shelves is the price we pay for broader, more liberal library service. Of what use is the most complete caged storehouse of knowledge if it exists in a vacuum? Information must be shared if it is to have value. Yet, removal of books from library shelves renders them inaccessible to other potential borrowers — a form of censorship. Even the conscientious borrower follows a "policy of restricting the public-expression of ideas, opinions, conceptions and impulses"⁴ How much worse is the situation when large numbers of borrowers choose to ignore circulation deadlines, keeping borrowed materials long beyond their due dates. Such behavior seriously handicaps the researcher attempting to conduct a literature search only to find repeated gaps in the information chain. It has been accurately pointed out that unlike other forms of media that serve to connect a speaker or writer with a larger audience, "the library throws its weight on the opposite side of the scale, increasing the power of the single inquirer by linking him with an ever vaster number of sources of information."⁵ The information cannot be coherent or complete if too many links are missing.



Appointed Reference/Bibliography Instruction Librarian at Ohio State University's Undergraduate Library in April 1987. Gerald Greenberg received his M.I.S. from Kent State University in 1985. He had previously worked in OSU Libraries' Circulation Department and had taught high school social studies and English.

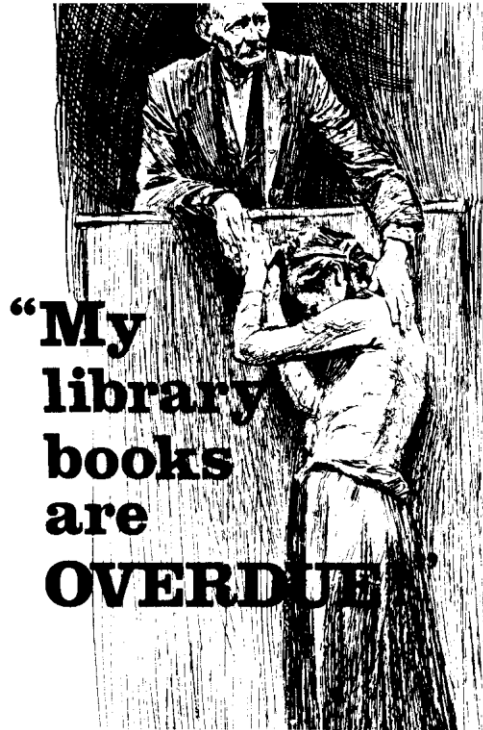
Jill Fatzer, Assistant Director of Ohio State University Libraries, writing in *Tracings* (Spring 1987), the OSU Libraries newsletter, spoke of those who abuse circulation regulations as inadvertent censors. Ohio State has long employed a generous circulation policy permitting indefinite renewal of borrowed materials as long as another patron does not request them. This generosity has fostered the growth of a minority of what may be termed "legal abusers" who maintain private, personal collections of library books for several years by merely phoning the library's telephone center to renew their volumes whenever they receive an overdue notice. Legal though they may be, such borrowers deprive many a browser of the opportunity of viewing books relevant to their subject on the shelves.

Despite Ohio State's liberal approach to circulation, the University Libraries have their share of negligent borrowers, some of whom fail to renew borrowed materials for several months. Such patrons are then billed for the books, which are assumed lost, and forfeit their library privileges until restitution is made. While some libraries have had success in enticing the negligent borrower to return items by declaring occasional "amnesty days" when past fines are forgotten, some OSU borrowers have looked upon the university's extended loan period as a perpetual amnesty. They apparently see no need to return materials until they are being actively penalized for their possession.

For this reason, the Libraries have moved to tighten circulation regulations and shorten grace periods. Computer-generated letters will explain the status of overdue materials to the borrower, replacing briefer postcards in certain instances. After nine weeks, overdue books will be assumed lost, replacing the previous sixteen week time period. Hopefully, the negligent borrower will be prompted to settle his/her circulation problems within a shorter time frame, resulting in a quicker return of overdue materials (or replacement of same) to the shelves.

Libraries might not have to adopt a more punitive stance, however, if the problem borrower would clearly recognize the negative impact his/her actions have on the library community. Equating such borrowers with censors reaches to the philosophical heart of the matter. The library acts against abusive borrowers because they are "post facto" (after publication) censors, effectively limiting the amount and kind of information the library has to offer to the community. Perhaps educational efforts should stress this aspect of the problem. The inadvertent censors may be surprised to see themselves in this light, and may even take appropriate action to disassociate themselves from such an intellectually unflattering appellation. Surely, all library users would

benefit from such an eventuality.



Used by permission of Youngstown and Mahoning County Public Library.

Footnotes

1. Arthur E. Bostwick, "Pains and Penalties in Library Work." *Library Journal* 27 (July 1902): Cont No. 29-34.
2. Bernice Jones, "What Your Overdue Library Book Costs Us," *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 22 (January 1926): 10-11.
3. George A. Stephen, "Regulations Affecting the Loan of Books in Libraries," *Library Association Record* 9 (April 1907): 174.
4. Harold Lasswell, "Censorship." *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1930). 290.
5. Dan Mabry Lacy, "Libraries and Freedom of Access to Information." In *Libraries and the Life of the Mind in America* (Chicago: ALA, 1977), 32.